

Stepping up in lean times

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Feb 06, 2011

The low-hanging fruit -- in this case, state expenses that could be axed without much pain -- was all harvested during last year's legislative session.

But with the end to stimulus money in sight and further reductions in federal aid on the way, state leaders are facing a tougher challenge squaring up the state budget now.

In his State of the State address, Gov. Neil Abercrombie already telegraphed the plain truth that closing the \$844 million hole that exists now through the next fiscal biennium means government downsizing in combination with tax increases.

He warned about the loss of federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds for anything but the top two priorities: welfare cash payments to needy families and jobs programs. And by week's end the other shoe had dropped: A total of 41 nonprofit organizations receiving state contracts for lesser priorities were lopped off the state Department of Human Services budget.

A lot of sensible projects are on the cut list, including some contracts for services that seem part of the social bedrock. For example, domestic violence shelter services are critical to families at risk, and the Institute for Human Services seems especially essential in times of high unemployment and homelessness; the loss of funds for such programs will be keenly felt.

Some have observed that a few on the list do seem to qualify for a higher-priority class, such as a contract to provide employment services for lower-wage earners and other job-oriented programs. Lawmakers may need to give some of these cuts another look.

But trying to rescue every project uncritically defeats the whole idea of fiscal discipline. For example, a measure seeking to tap the state's Emergency and Budget Reserve ("rainy day") fund will come up for a hearing Thursday. Senate Bill 935 is being eyed as an escape hatch for social service cuts, siphoning off more rainy day money "to maintain the levels of programs determined to be essential to education,

public health and public welfare."

Those categories are broad, and it's easy to imagine many of the proposed social service cuts finding refuge under that wide umbrella. Lawmakers need to show greater resolve than that. If any funds are to be squeezed out for state contracts, it should be for services that hew most closely to the state's core responsibilities, providing for the basic needs of its poorest people and helping them prepare for employment and self-sufficiency.

Some programs require a specifically and intensively trained staff, but others on the list serve needs that can be met by remaining agencies. For example, literacy training once was seated primarily in schools and homes and could be maintained by tapping an underused reservoir of community spirit.

Across the country, local governments have been refocusing on volunteerism as one means to get through lean times. Phoenix, for example, has drawn on volunteers to help offset staffing cutbacks in libraries, parks and other areas. The situation here is not precisely comparable, but the underlying principle is the same: The community has some responsibility in solving its own problems and should pitch in to fulfill that duty. Government should not always be the answer.

The loss of contracts to nonprofit agencies has real consequence, not the least of which are the layoffs that are sure to result as programs shut or shrink. Abercrombie allotted a moment to acknowledge the "emotionally trying" reality, and to entertain new ideas.

"These unfunded contracts are for worthy programs,"

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he said, "and we must now find new ways to support our neighbors."

Perhaps the best service government can provide at this stage is some creative thinking about how to marshal the power of people to bridge the gaps. The economy is bound to improve, but even when tax coffers recover, doing more with less should be the new norm.

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